

Iconoclasm versus Conservatism: Elucidating the Intrinsic of Okara's the Voice and Asare's Rebel

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1. INTRODUCTION

This essay attempts a criticism of Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* and Bediako Asare's *Rebel* to engender a subtle syncretism of certain thematic elements of the two novels. The motivation to do this lies in the discovery that both Okara and Asare, though operated from different nationalities, seem to be dedicated to a common course of preaching the message that problems often arise when an individual's ideology places him against the standards of his society. Such literary agenda that evokes ideological difference between an individual's philosophy and the societal dialectics has been the motif of the earliest African novel inasmuch as evidences have been made available by the works of the likes of Achebe, Ngugi, Armah etc. For instance, Ayi Kwei Armah's celebrated novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* creates this kind of scenario with emphasis on the conflict between its protagonist and the corrupt society where he finds himself. Since our choice novels are regarded as 'exponents' of the African novel, a brief, but illuminating explanation of the circumstantial and formal details of the African novel, which itself has been controversial, will suffice.

2. THE AFRICAN NOVEL: CONTEXTING THE GENRE

The myriads of fiction in Africa, and critical responses to them since the publication of Tutuola's *Palmwine Drinkard*, have put to rest the imperial speculation as to whether there exists any form of literature called the African novel. In fact, not this alone, the 'threadbare critical assumption' that places the African novel as an appendage of the western literature is almost being lowered to its grave. The statement before this sentence will, ineluctably, reveal that the genre, African novel, is controversial, perhaps, because of certain problems. These include the problem of definition of form.

The problem of definition of the African novel, which had primordially beleaguered the form stemmed from the problem of the definition of the African literature in its totality. Clearly against all Eurocentric assumption often detrimental to the sovereignty of the literature, African literature has been accepted as operational within its own aesthetics and ethnographic literary republic. Hence, there is no more doubt that there is a literature specifically African only that the problem has been "how to determine which *prima facie* literary items should be included under such a heading or excluded from it" (Oyegoke 1980:02). This problem was later to attract labyrinthine solutions from the practitioners themselves and Achebe's logic outstandingly merits reconsideration as an impeccable answer to the tormenting problem of definition. To him

You cannot cramp African literature into a small, neat definition. I do not see African literature as one unit but a group of associated units – in fact, the sum total of all national and ethnic literature of Africa (1975:58)

Here, Achebe's emphasis on nationality does not seem to attach the yardstick of language to the condition of *Africaness* of form. This however negates Wali's trenchant recommendation that suggests the indigenous language as the only worthy necessity in the measure of Africanity of literary form, claiming, "the secondary place which African languages now occupy in our educational system would be reversed if our writers would devote their tremendous gifts and abilities to their own languages" (Wali, 334). This radical stance maintained by Wali was

gradually played out of relevance since authors like Achebe whose works seem to form the core of the discourse of the African novel would have been excluded from the canon of African literature especially since their works were written in English.

We may then agree with Gordimer that African writing is that writing done “in any language by Africans themselves and by others of whatever skin colour who share the African experience and who have what we call ‘the African-centered consciousness’” (*The Black Interpreters*). Though we may perceive the pseudo-narcissistic tone in Gordimer’s definition of African literature, it must be noted that the atmosphere to define the literature the way Gordimer did was initially provided in 1962, in a conference of African writers in English, where a definition of African literature as “creative writing in which an African setting is authentically handled or to which experience originating in Africa and integral” was supplied to accommodate such non-white writers like Dorris Lessing, Alan Paton and Nadine Gordimer herself; excluding Conrad, Green and Cary (Ngara 1987:3). Though the centrality of this work touches the African novel, our seeming lexical profligacy on African literature need be permitted since it is intended to establish the domain of the literature that is inherently African, which is the microcosmic literary outfit that accommodates the African novel.

A meaningful discussion of the African novel will unavoidably start with names like Tutuola, Achebe, Ekwensi (all of Nigeria) Ngugi (Kenya), Laye (Guinea) and Mofolo (South Africa) and others. This is because these writers played very prominent roles in fashioning the genre in Africa. Although these writers and their contemporaries were scattered all over Africa and they wrote at different times, what is common to their aesthetics is that “in content, their novels reflected the socio-political activities and thinking of the[ir] time” (Ngara 1987:31).

Also according to Ngara, some of these earlier novelists reflected culture contact and culture conflict as thematic commitments as they placed premium, more often, on the effect of colonialism on the African cultural outfits. This for a long time remained the thesis for them as they were either reflecting the effects of westernization on the African society. Hence, it is not uncommon to discover in the African novel what Goulder refers to as the individual malaise and communal plight often resulting from the African experiences with the alien administration of the colonialists. Little wonder Achebe would then, in *Arrow of God*, depict the disintegrating effect of the western education the African on the institution of the traditional religion of his Igbo setting. Apart from this simple portrayal of the common conflict of cultures by the African novel, there is also what we may call the portrayal of ideological conflicts which we alluded to in the beginning of this essay. Within such portrayal, it is possible to see how certain visionary perception and reformist psyche of certain protagonist will lead to radicalism which may plunge him head-long against the conservative, old and ritualistic customs of his people. Such a protagonist we refer to as an iconoclast – someone who seeks to abrogate an existing order, perhaps, in a bid to replace it with what his ideological reflexes recommend.

Gabriel Okara’s Okolo in *The Voice* and Bediako Asare’s Ngurumo in *Rebel* are exemplars here since they blend perfectly into the image of the iconoclast especially as their ideologies tilt towards the expurgation of certain order from the socio-cultural rubrics of the people. In this study, we hope to take the two protagonists (Okolo and Ngurumo) respectively and illuminate their reformist ideologies via the preponderance of the societal oppositions that confront them. As our commitment, we hope to highlight, within the parentheses of the selected novels, the radical agenda of the iconoclast as pitched against the complacency of the African society, presented by both novels as ritualistic, gagged and emasculated under the tutelage of brutish dictatorial leaders presented as perpetually callous.

3. THE STRIDENT VOICE OF THE ICONOCLAST IN OKARA’S THE VOICE

When Okara’s novel, *The Voice*, was published in 1964, it was not given the kind of reception that Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) got from the African critics. Mainly because of the unconventional use of English language that the novel exhibits, it was placed on the same pedestal of “unacceptable” with Tutuola’s *Palmwine Drinkard* (1952) among the notable African critics especially in Nigeria. However, both Tutuola and Okara, in spite of the allegation of linguistic deficiencies levied against their novels, still deserve accolades. This is why it is not surprising that some Okara’s critics like M. Mcmillan would aver that *The Voice* “is an interesting and

imaginative piece of writing” because of its simplicity of parable and poignancy of an epitaph (*The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*). Equally commenting, Lawrence says of *The Voice* that it is “certainly one of the most memorable novels that have come out of Nigeria” and Ravenscroft concurs that “I share this (Lawrence) view” because *The Voice* “is very much a poetic novel ... which suggests artificial beauty” (*The Voice*, p. 4). Basically because as Ravenscroft puts it, “*The Voice* has not had the kind of recognition it deserves”, this essay is motivated to do the kind of study that we hope will open critic’s eyes to the possibility of initiating critical evaluations that will reduce the perpetual tendency of the played-up criticism of the aberrant syntactic network abounding in the novel.

We start the analysis of *The Voice* with the useful contributions from some notable critics who have identified the need to understand the predicament of Okolo, the protagonist, as that which is not independent of the society. Fortunately, Nwabuwe (1997) treats the theme of madness in the novel pendulously so much that it swings to and fro and germane questions bordering on the sanity or madness of Okolo, or even of the Amatu society, are raised. Even in spite of the decadent social level identified in Amatu, Nwabuwe still raises searching question that “is it not possible that corrupt as the society is, that it still upholds certain moral principle that Okolo necessarily falls short of?” (*Obitun* 1997:74). Though Okolo is identified by Ashaolu (1979) as a social reformer and a prophet in a decadent society, Palmer believes that Okolo’s crying may well be uncalled for “since he himself is socially maladjusted”, meaning that he is “out of tune with the prevailing culture and neither accepts the values of his society nor collaborates in their presentation” (62). Perhaps because of this, the society of Amatu identifies a chronic insanity in Okolo and such an individual is adjudged unfit to thrive in the society. Chief Izongo insists:

You must leave this town. It will (though) pain our insides too much to see you suffer we are a soft people and even now if you agree to join us, we untie your hands, and you will have no need to knock your head against stone as you are doing now (48).

From Izongo’s speech cited above, it is clear that he acknowledges the fact that Okolo is not mentally maladjusted. However, Izongo knows that Okolo’s ideological inquiry is a threat to his somewhat tyrannical authority. He then uses his power of rhetoric, furnished by the erudition of Abadi, to confine Okolo’s onslaught to the psychological asylum of the people. This is the problem of a self-acclaimed iconoclast.

Okolo’s problem presumably starts when he unrepentantly begins to search for something he never defines than an ‘it’ and according to Ravenscroft, “we are never told in so many words what ‘it’ means” (*The Voice* 07). This unguided quest makes his immediate society of Amatu to identify a mentally deranged personality in Okolo and when he remains incorrigibly implacable, he is ostracized from the society. This pushes him to Sologa where he is only to confirm the initial warning of Tebeowei that “things are worse there” (52). Right inside the boat on his way to Sologa, he has started to taste the hostile reception prepared for his type in the “Big One’s Town” as he is accused of attempting to seduce Ebiere, a small woman who travels with her mother-in-law, only because he covers the lady with his raincoat. According to Nwabuwe “The seriousness with which the [cantankerous] mother-in-law takes what was just a too close body contact with no emotion attached is surprising” (*Obitun* 1997:81). Also astounding is the ludicrous extent to which this woman drags the case to the extent of forcing Okolo to swear by Amadosu the town’s god. Perhaps for the first time the readers, through this absurd drama erupted from an innocuous body contact, are able to see that something is indeed amiss in Sologa. Okolo could hardly thrive in Sologa before he gets repatriated to Amatu. Back in Amatu, he chooses to confront the authority and he is killed with Tuere the witch, his self-appointed accomplice.

Okolo has a problem of methodology as he prosecutes his ideology in a decadent society that has complacently, and ignorantly too, thrived under the power of Izongo – even though his problems do not stop at this. Iconoclasm has its own attendant problems, especially since an iconoclast is always a radical who is interested in up-turning a social order which hitherto must have excelled in its sacrosanctity. We identify that Okolo is angry with the society because it lacks something

whose name he fails to mention. His people therefore assume that his not being able to recognize and identify the substance of his quest is an indication of “his head (that) was not correct” (1).

Invariably by the societal standard, language is an integral and unifying factor. Hence, everything in the society has, or should have, a name. Okolo’s failure to name ‘it’ becomes a thing that aggravates the claim of his madness. It apparently becomes difficult for him to define his intention. This is why Palmer believes that “he could be considered insane according to the standards of his society” (64). Okolo claims it is strategic that he gives no name to the substance of his quest especially because he believes “names bring division and strife”. To him, “...let *it* be without a name. Let *it* be nameless....” Little does he know that this reconditivist approach of his makes his ideology rather convoluted and therefore it becomes unacceptable to the generality of the people. He is already on his way to his grave before he could have an insignificant number of converts in Tuere, Ukule and Abadi: two of who may help in the sustenance and further prosecution of his goal. This, however, is if they can learn from his mistake of excessive theorizing.

Evidently, many critics of *The Voice* missed the target of the novel by placing it in a wrong position mainly because they make the same mistake that Okolo himself is guilty of. By remaining profoundly philosophical and theoretical, Okolo fails to make an enviable impact. In the same vein, Okara’s critics of *The Voice* adopted too theoretical an approach to the study of the novel and the minutiae of the form have since been amplified to an extent that what a would-be critic of *The Voice* gets from the libraries are critical titles bordering on the disabled English syntax of the novel, forgetting that Okara’s use of English in the manner he has done is deliberate. This is indubitably a product of misreading provided within the framework of Eurocentric critics of African literature. Granted that many white critics of the African literature like Lindfors and Larson did well to orchestrate the criticism of African literature in their various publications, but at this stage of literary scholarship in the literature, many eye-brows have been raised against the extreme to which the white critics use their critical license on the literature with demeaning reductionism. This license to many Afrocentric scholarly minds has since become critical recklessness which makes many to be misled about the actual message of the African author. According to Kanneh (1997:69) “authentic communion with an African text is possible only (if at all) from the pure African him/herself – a matter of inherent or contextual coincidence.” This then brings to the fore, the assumption that “theoretical approaches to literature may not be simply generalisable but need be checked by the traditions echoing in or forming the text” (Kanneh 1997:71).

The “other traditions echoing” from the text are often supplied by the cultural or ethnic institutions in the Amatu and Sologo societies of *The Voice* where the citizens, including Okolo, are not too disposed to verbosity – they are quite taciturn. Therefore, an elaborated celebration of the language form in *The Voice* may lead to a kind of fallacy in which the author, rather than the text, becomes the object of discussion. However the linguistic explanation to Okara’s intrinsic social complication is explainable in terms of the fact that the society is the non-eloquent type. Perhaps because of this, Okolo lacks the expression to define ‘it’ and the other citizens lack the adjective to do so appropriately. The *signifier* can therefore not be found for the *signified*, resulting to Okolo’s inability to communicate and carry the people along. We can assume here that Okolo’s psychic know-how operates beyond the socio-cultural level of his town’s men and this makes him, like most iconoclasts, an alien.

The main problem of the iconoclast is that of alienation. Alienation is a state of estrangement or isolation from the continuation of socio-cultural events. According to Fashina (1993), “Alienation...also means the position of being a foreigner in respect of an individual national identity” (1). Either of these definitions of alienation one adopts, Okolo is absolutely a stranger in his society. The failure of Chief Izongo and the citizenry in Amatu society to see what he sees makes Okolo’s alienation from the socio-political set ups so pronounced. To compound his problems, he tantalizes the people with the substance of his quest in his characteristic failure to define what he sees as missing within the societal standard of rectitude. His problems are akin to that of Jesus Christ who was rejected in his society not only because “a prophet is without honour in his constituency” but also because of his advanced and subtle gospel which found fault in the

apotheosized Pharisaic order of his days. Okolo, however, could not have made the impact that Jesus made in his society since his own calling was rather not divine but secular.

Whereas Jesus' teaching made very mammoth impact on even his critics, perhaps, because he was properly immersed in the anointing of empowerment, Okolo turns out to be "the voice ... crying in the spiritual wilderness and calling for a restoration of tradition, integrity and moral purity" (Palmer 1981). Unfortunately, the voice, according to Ashaolu, "falls on deaf ears" (1979). However, in spite of this difference between Okolo and Jesus who was in his own time regarded as an iconoclast, one, through Jesus' success story, discovers that most branded iconoclasts are often regarded as nobodies in their societies and in the like manner with which a son of a Carpenter Joseph confronts the Israel of his time, Okolo, a 'common' secondary school leaver "shows the greatest courage in pursuit of what he believes" (Moody et al 1984).

Consequently, using truth as a revolutionary weapon against a decadent society, Okolo resolutely challenges the powers that matter in the societal organogram and because of "his resolute challenge to the chief and the elders, he is branded as a public enemy and suffers banishment" (Gorlder 1989 in Emenyonu 1989:20). As a public enemy, Okolo is left with no hiding place.

According to Gorlder, Okolo needs to "establish a relationship with the "masses" creating the message and making it grow like a plant which visualizes an actual verbal "icon" (1989:20). This, Okolo fails to do and he experiences an aggravated level of alienation before his eventual annihilation. This quickly brings to mind again the issue of methodological flaw identified as the centrality of Okolo's problem. Instead of sharing his idea with the masses who, most likely, would have understood his psychology, he mystifies it and he is not able to evoke the sympathy he deserves. What Okolo fails to do, Chief Izongo, who even has all the powers, does as he scoops the sentiment of his people even after the successful banishment of Okolo the acclaimed reformer.

It was a great task I performed, my people.
A great task of sending him (Okolo) away.
A dangerous task, but it had to be done for the
good of us all. We did it with our eyes on
our occiputs, for it is a strong thing be to send
away one who is looking for *it*. Only a mad
man looks for *it* in this turned world... (72)

Even as Izongo speaks, coaxingly, to the people, appealing to their conscience, he "paused and surveyed the crowd" (72). Not only this, he throws a party attaching a condition that

I and the elders have here decided not to
allow Okolo to come back to this our town.
If he shows his face in the town we shall
send him, and any person like him away
forever and ever (72 – 73).

This is how Izongo's tyranny thrives and every opposition he subdues with characteristic charisma. To think of it, Izongo's use of "turned world" is well revealing about the up-turned nature of the Amatu society. Through this we know that the chief (Izongo) himself and his people are aware of the despicable extent of decadence and disheartening situations in Amatu; only that complacency and conservatism make the people prefer the society that is replete with turpitude to any modernist ideological sophistication that is tailored towards the cleansing of the society.

Here, the notion of the proverbial devil which is preferable to the unknown saint becomes the guiding explanation for why the society chooses the actual instead of the ideal. Not only this, there is that belief among Africans that an angel in hell is most likely positive to devilry, most especially since whiteness may not thrive absolutely in a coal mine or palm oil mill. Hence, Okolo's purported madness is rather not psychiatric but social since it sounds absurd to the whole society that he alone claims exoneration and sainthood. In all veracity, the Amatu's society appears mad since, as Izongo identifies the capsizal of order in his use of "turned world". However, such madness should be measured in terms of the ideal decorum.

Why Okolo, who is a product of the same society, becomes the ‘eye’ to behold the indecorum is worrisome to the people and he is exposed to a fierce pogrom. Since he lacks the strategic diplomacy with which he ought to have sold his ideas and prosecute his intention to an adorable end, Okolo fails. Though some may argue that he makes some impact on some converts like Tuere, the witch, Ukule the cripple and Abadi the second in command, we must know that Abadi is still unsettled and his mind is still unplaceable. Ukule, though a true convert is physically challenged and lacks, the physique to explore the desire of his heart. It is even possible that he falls for Okolo’s ideology because of his lasting discipleship to Tuere. Tuere is an impeccable convert since she has identified, from the outset, with the seeming misanthropic posture of Okolo perhaps because she herself has been an outcast – a victim of witch hunt. Even if Tuere had not suffered the same fate as Okolo, it is still very doubtful that a female would make any significant impact in a patrifocal society governed by evident machismo. Okolo’s voice then becomes an unamplified – unechoed – voice whose acoustic effect is overwhelmed by the noise of decadence of his society.

4. THE INITIATIVE OF REBELLION IN ASARE’S REBEL

The missing substance may be duly conceptualized as “reasoning”, which we believe is the only tool of foresight. What is missing in Asare’s society of Pachanga, Ngurumo turns out While Okara in *The Voice* presents an iconoclastic reformer who is unstrategic and unmethodical in his approach at re-orienting his people, Bediako Asare, a Ghanaian novelist, presents a more calculated, accurate and precise visionary in *Rebel* (1969) a novel in which Ngurumo is the protagonist.

Working on *Rebel* has not been easy since, as at the time this essay was prepared, one of the problems confronting its success was the scarcity of critical responses to the novel. The totality of what was available on the author himself (who is sometimes addressed as Konadu Asare) was so sketchy to the extent that one could drop the idea of any further critical inquiry into the novel. Even as Ikiddeh in “The Character of Popular Fiction in Ghana” suggests that “the most prominent popular fiction writer in Ghana are Asare Konadu (Bediako) and E.K Mickson”, we discover that missing in “a dozen of titles” attributed to the duo is Asare’s *Rebel*: a novel that is of analytical interest here. This is no doubt the inscription of the problem of undue canonization of some literary writers, which is “the elevation of some works (or writers) to celestial heights, to the level of canon” to the extent that “a great work may be denigrated and even ignored in critical discourse as experienced by Shakespeare and D.H Lawrence (Egbagha 2004:480). Though we are not out to establish as a truism, the fact that nothing critical has been made available on Asare’s *Rebel*, what we believed is that what is available on Okara’s *The Voice*, of which we initially said has not even enjoyed enough critical attention, overshadows that of *Rebel*, which is a good novel to be put in critical focal prominence any day. This notwithstanding, we decided to forge ahead with the analysis of *Rebel* since it would amount to contributing to the canonical influence of the already canonized works by enriching the cascade of literary materials available on them, especially if we limit our discussions to Okara’s *The Voice*.

Asare, in *Rebel* seems to capture the pre-colonial order in Africa where a fetish priest and a few accomplices dominate and dictate in the socio-political life of the people. From Asare’s *Rebel*, it is possible to see the overpowering influences of the African priests in the pre-colonial Africa. It is discovered that even where there were monarchs, such were often rendered as mere figure – heads since they had to take certain decisions of rulership from the gods, who are often ably represented by these errant priests.

The African community in focus in *Rebel* is Pachanga, an isolated and unknown settlement which is faced with the imminence of extinction resulting from starvation which the community already experiences in spite of the people’s hard work and their repeated sacrifices to their gods.

At first, the crops had been reasonably healthy. But each succeeding crop became more meagre. Eventually, it became hardly worth harvesting. Preparing the ground for the seed, keeping down the hostile, obdurate weeds and gathering the crops – such as they were – taxed the people physically (10).

This agro-economic retrogression, Ngurumo quickly identifies and he begins to visualize the possibility of a rather empirical solution to the problem instead of giving in to the lame-duck approach to survival often recommended by the gods through their oracle. He therefore starts to fantasize with the idea of evacuating the people of Pachanga to a more fertile land which his clandestine intrigues have discovered. This definitely makes him stand out as an iconoclast who, as we have signified, will always, because of his ideological beliefs and interest, oscillates to a different direction from the societal norm.

Ngurumo's ideology therefore has an obstacle as "the voice of the gods," Mzee Matata the priest says that the gods forbid such an exodus. For Ngurumo, selling such a romantic idea to the general public becomes a problem. For instance, it takes painstaking effort before he could convince even his wife to see reasons why such a decision is desirable. From the beginning of the story to the end, the focus remains on Ngurumo's escapades to reform the conservative and stagnated reasoning of Matata and the people, who have chosen to follow their revered priest hook, line and sinker.

In a reader's review presented by Amazon Books, it is stated that *Rebel* "is a well-written story set in a nostalgically colourful and mythical African jungle where all that could go wrong does go wrong" (emphasis mine). This then brings to mind again the society where things have been out of joint or where something is missing, to use Okolo's term. If then to accept this as the enduring explanation as the only man who has got it. This is why he stands out – though as a recidivist to the people.

Ngurumo's reasoning leads to his consciousness which as Williams (1977) puts it, is a part of ideology. According to Marx and Engels (1963), "consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence and the existence of men in their actual life process" (14). Ngurumo therefore lives up to the rating of 'real and active' men who have the characteristics of exhibiting great potentials of ideological reflexes. This is true of Ngurumo since he is the only one in the myopic society to identify the need for a change, to break free from the suffocating embrace of Nzee Matata who even dictates the kind of food that people should, or should not, eat. Not this alone, it is Ngurumo who fathoms certain rational explanation to the mystifying magic of Nzee Matata. Ngurumo it is, also, who unravels the mystery of the punishment often pronounced as reprimand for non-conformists in Pachanga. For instance, Matata had pronounced death penalty on Old Bishara's and family because of Bishara's failure to yield the maize "the fetish priest demanded" (*Rebel* p 4). Ngurumo therefore discovers the complicity of men, not of gods, in the extermination of the whole family.

Ngurumo had not been as impressed as the other. In his young and questing mind, there were stings of doubt. Perhaps they might not have been there had he not seen Fundi, Nzee Matata's intimate companion, and the one likely to be named by the fetish priest as his successor, sneaking into Bishara's hut carrying something in a pot. That was the day the family died and Ngurumo had pondered over it ever since (*Rebel* p 5).

That Ngurumo discovers the possibility of poisoning is the explanation of the mysterious death of Bishara and family confirms the evil manipulations of the priesthood in the affairs of men. Not only this, Ngurumo's skepticism towards the affairs that brought about Omari's death reduces his respect for the priest and his gods (Omari had been bitten by a cobra because he laughed at the priest). The diabolical intrigues of the fetish priest put together, affirm Ngurumo's doubt towards the sacrosanctity of the fetishistic enterprise under Matata and he tries to pursue his ideological belief. Though William (1977) believes that consciousness is part of ideology, we see through Ngurumo that consciousness, most likely, precedes ideology since he at first, becomes conscious of himself and of his immediate environment as having been out of place and later formulates his ideology with the intention to abandon the unproductive old ways. As a product of consciousness therefore, it is possible for "men and their circumstances [to] appear upside down as in a camera obscura" (Marx and Engel 1963:14).

Ngurumo's scheme of dynamism runs counter to the conservative tendency of Nzee Matata and that of the citizens in Pachanga. This brings about penetrating and mind-bulging questions. But why should the gods do that?... Why won't they let us have good crops? Haven't we sacrificed to them more than before? And didn't Nzee Matata promise that the crops would improve if we killed those goats as a sacrifice? (12)

He is therefore the first to notice that in spite of their increased sacrifices, they may never achieve any improvement better than fattening the old priest. His discoveries make him agitate for a better livelihood for himself and the society and he furthers his search for a replacement for the land of Pachanga which has become unfertile. As a reward for his quest,

He saw this fertile reach of territory as the answer to the problem of his people. Soil that would support grass of such richness would also produce fat crops. For some time he glanced about in satisfaction at the wind-stirred grass. It rose shoulder high and it was a rich emerald. It would provide excellent pasture for many herds of cattle (*Rebel* p 28).

The idea presented to the community by Ngurumo constitutes a threat to Nzee Matata's authority since his new idea will amount to a radical break-away from the territory where the gods can reach them. Hence, if the gods are made redundant in sensitive decision-making, the hegemonic control which he, Matata, maintains might be *deregulated* and people will exercise certain freedom that might weaken his tenacious grip of the people's psyche. Because of their shortsightedness, the people of Pachanga submit to the continuous sophistry that mandates the guidance of gods in the dealings of men. Matata's irredentist posture consequently enjoys the sympathy of the people and Ngurumo ends up being perceived as a deviant in the society and, because, to identify with Russell (1985) "there can be no simple opposition to culture, no transcendental perspective or language; no secure singular self definition" which must run contradistinctively to the order of the society, failure seems to loom for him.

Ngurumo's problems also stems from alienation. He becomes socially and psychologically quarantined as he shares a different belief that is to the tune of seeking livelihood elsewhere. Even when a stranger, Shabani, comes to confirm the fact that sophistication already exists, and that the people of Pachanga are not the sole tenants of the earth, the people are still slow in taking the step that might engender the swing to modernist sophistication. To prove the people's incorrigible conservatism, Shabani's influence could not hasten their decision. Shabani the supposed forerunner of modernity, ends up as a John the Baptist who gets sacrificed on a platter of gold. Surprisingly, his 'magic stick' (gun) could not save him from the complicity anchored by Zamani who turns out as the Herodias of the story.

Zamani asked him (Shabani) to visit her hut to look at one of her children. She said the child was ill. The snake (which had been concealed in the hut) bit him when he went into the hut.

What about the child? There was no child there. Then a trap was laid for Shabani. Zamani

had the snake concealed in her hut and ready to bite (*Rebel* p 137).

Shabani's demise shows the extent to which people's proclivity towards power can take them since his murder is a part of Fundi's plan to retain the scepter that his boss, Matata, has bequeathed on him.

Ngurumo eventually, and successfully too, leads the retinue of "men, women and children all carrying their most needed household and personal efforts" from Pachanga to Nyansa, the new world, the protagonist's El dorado (*Rebel* p 14). We may therefore, unambiguously conclude that the 'new' triumphs over the 'old' and unvisionary customs. This notwithstanding, one cannot help visualizing the looming problems of this new land and its democratization of processes. People's querulous nature may pose problems as, like the Biblical Israelites, some of the people are seen looking back to their days in Pachanga nostalgically: "After twelve moons on the new land, few spoke longingly of Pachanga" (*Rebel* p 154).

Like the self-appointed Moses of the people, Ngurumo must, therefore, expect incessant complaints in the tradition of "are there no lands in Egypt?" Even as one rejoices with Ngurumo

that he ends as better iconoclast than Okolo in *The Voice*, we still identify that the human nature in him still desires some things he believes are still missing:

“There are so many things we haven't got” he told his cabinet one day ‘Shabani talked about some of them. It seems people elsewhere are more civilized than we are (*Rebel* p 155).

Though Ngurumo, now the leader, identifies one of the missing things as education “the thing needed for writing and reading” one wonders what awaits him as problems in trying to explain ‘education’ to “the colleagues [who] looked at him like mummies” (*Rebel* p 156). Albeit he believes “our greatest days lie ahead”, the unexpected and premature demise of Shabani, their only link to civilization, leaves a mere speculative trace to follow: “it was over there – over those mountains – that Shabani came from” (*Rebel* p 56). Only time will tell whether their successful contact with Shabani's world will solve their problems.

5. CONCLUSION

We conclude this essay by reenacting our initial position that in spite of all the available critical responses to some canonized works, “the criticism of the African novel has not gone far beyond scratching the surface meaning of most of the novels that have dominated the parlance of literary discuss (Ogunbesan 1975:93). In the light of this, the essay has complemented existing criticism on Okara's *The Voice* and Asare's *Rebel*, both novels which are committed to the ideological conflicts that ensue when individualistic goals attempt to upturn the existing communal order. Thus we identify and instance of clash of ideological interests in the two novels considered.

Both novels present protagonists that exhibit better ideological reflexes than their companions in their societies and they see better with their third eye. This is why Okolo is the only one to identify that the Amatu society is bereft of an ‘it’ which is not even understood by the generality of the people. In the same vein Ngurumo discovers the need for a change from the unproductive *status quo* which is about plunging the Pachanga community to starvation. In actualizing their dreams, both characters are pitched against hegemonic authorities greater in influence than theirs. Hence, Okolo on the one side faces chief Nzongo and his cabinet while Ngurumo on the other is in a tug-of-war with Nzee Matata, the fetish priest, and his cohorts.

With the belief that critics of African literature “should concentrate on what African novelists are trying to say and less on the way in which they say it” we have emphasized on the authorial messages of Okara and Asare and, discoveries are made that it seems both are saying iconoclasm in the face of conservatism has its attendant problems, especially in an existential society which is bereft of order. Such themes are dominant in the African novel as authors like Armah, Achebe, Ngugi and a host of others including some popular female writers, whose thematic commitments are tailored towards signifying certain female protagonist for manly exploits and responsibilities, have many of their works adorned by these themes.

Within Achebe's works like *Things Fall Apart*, and *Anthill of the Savannah*, iconoclastic characters who strong-willingly identify themselves as not belonging to the crowds of the misled are evident. Ngugi's commitment to characters that toweringly confront the domineering control of the white landlords is obvious in most of his novels in which Mau Mau recidivism is often at the focal prominence. A mention of these exemplars no doubts will confirm that many African novelists have a penchant for the portrayal of the theme in which certain individuals will refuse to belong to the recurring trend of abnormality.

This is however not limited to the genre of the African novel alone as many a good dramatists exhibit flair for such theme expressed in the discussed novels. We may then conclude that such a thematic commitment of iconoclasm versus conservatism portrayed by Okara of Nigeria and Asare of Ghana is an important, keynote for the African literature. According to James modern African literature is significant because “it documents in its own historical development and its preoccupations the tensions and the contradictions in present-day Africa”. These tensions and contradictions, Okara and Asare have subtly reflected in their novels which have been considered in this study. (147).

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